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Response Paper, *The House of Mirth*: Book II, Chapters 1-4

Or

Why Being a Gerty Farish Isn’t So Bad

In *The House of Mirth*, Gerty Farish is initially presented as what is meant to be the horrifying cautionary tale to young women of a courting age. The epitome of loneliness, Gerty’s lack of “marriageable” appeal has caused her to be wholly unacknowledged within her society, in which beauty is exalted and high social standing is unquestioned authority. She is eager, philanthropic, independent, exuberant, and self-effacing, yet because of her “dull face,” she is cast off as “mediocre” and “ineffectual” (143, 78). Even so, girls like Lily Bart, who lack Gerty’s nondescript appearance, do not lack their share of problems. I argue that within the pages of *The House of Mirth*, the prospect of marriage and affluence in society is not only negated as the cure-all for both personal problems and problems of social status, but brings a slew of issues not only unbeknownst but innocently irrelevant to Gerty Farish. While a looker she is not, Gerty’s scrupulous character and freedom from being forced to play the game raises her to a level unparalleled by the singularity which Lily has attained “by a hundred indefinable shades” (188).

Gerty Farish is the anomaly – the outlier. While Selden is the anti-social climber, he is still increasingly immersed in society in all its “stupid costliness” and “showy dullness,” its suffocating ideals and formalities (188). He is disdainful of this world yet he is not removed from it. From her praise of Lily to Selden, to her philanthropic efforts, to her unobtrusive admiration of the lavish people and places around her (which she humbly cherishes when she is occasionally included in their happenings), Gerty Farish symbolizes purity of intent. There is no ulterior motive to her kindness. Unlike Lily, whose life is continually “gay and beautiful and easy” until it is not, Gerty is not so easily susceptible of becoming in and then (or yet) out of control (171). This is because she does not seek control. If Selden represents the disenchantment with this world, Gerty is the true removal: the glimmer of hope in separation that proves you can get away with your hands clean. While her peers may vary aesthetically, they are united in their comparative lack of moral fiber. And while in this society Gerty Farish lacks the ability to command attention, at the very least she can expect consistency. Lily’s dwindling popularity in New York -- which increases in severity as gossip continues to circulate about her, until she becomes the red herring of Bertha Dorset as well as disinherited by her aunt -- exemplifies a society wherein when you are picked up to be admired, you can be scrutinized, and even dropped, just as easily.

While Lily resents Gerty’s “indiscriminate and uncritical enjoyment” of the world around her, and her choice to succumb to dinginess, the two characters begin to interact more personably through their charity (117). Eventually the bond between the girls strengthens, and even when absorbed in a moment of profound hatred of her, Gerty is still there for Lily when no one else is (144). Over time we see Lily begin to garner elements of character similar to Gerty, but she only appears to earnestly exhibit these characteristics while in the process of what is considered to be the downward spiral of her social life. Her assisting in the repair of the Dorsets’ marriage is done “not for her own sake” (183), and yet results in accusation and ostracism for Lily. Can her Gertyesque actions be to blame? Or is it that, in a town full of social climbers and chasers of grandeur, you are assumed guilty until proven innocent? All good intent considered, it unfortunately for Lily cannot equate to a fresh start. This is through no fault of Gerty’s or her features, but of the antithesis: the world they live in, where, in the utilization of others to advance one’s goals, once you enter the game, you cannot exit.

Open-ended question:

Do you think it is truly possible to be selfless in this society? Can you always expect gratitude? (Lily thwarts her friends’ efforts to help her marry Percy Gryce; Bertha, “in the infatuation of self-destruction,” (183) thwarts Lily’s efforts to help her marriage spurring from George’s realization of Bertha’s infidelity.) In this expectance, is it really selfless?